

Paper 3: Why do print at all? Constructing a "dictionary" for the future

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Many 21st-century North American Indigenous communities are using print dictionaries and/or on-line lexical resources to support the continuity of their languages (Hinton & Weigel 2002). Here, we consider differences between a print and an on-line dictionary for Nxaʔamxčín (a Salish language; Washington State), and how these differences relate to questions of usability and sustainability.

Our paper is about the Nxaʔamxčín Database and Dictionary Project, which is based on 1960s/70s legacy materials. Dictionary work began in 1991; since 2006, project goals have explicitly included production of enduring, reusable lexical resources for learning, teaching, language revitalization and scholarly purposes. The project team (academics, programmers, Nxaʔamxčín Language Program members) is creating a print dictionary, as requested by community members (cf. Mosel 2012), as well as a searchable, extendable on-line database, both presenting rich lexical information in learner-friendly formats.

Producing digital and print versions of the same material has been instructive. Features such as interactivity, linking and searchability are particular strengths of on-line resources, as is the ability to present the same information in multiple formats – for example, for learners with varying proficiency levels. We are able to reproduce in print some of the efficient, effortless linking found in a web-based interactive environment, such as showing relationships between roots and words derived from them, and providing cross-references among synonyms. Multiple formats serving different proficiency levels are more difficult to contain in one book, but formatting and use of appendices open up possibilities.

Attention to the fragility of the digital environment has been significant in our project: at one point in the project's history, the digital content became obsolete and was rescued only because we had made physical print-outs. Therefore, to ensure sustainability and durability of the digital output, our project is working with TEI digital standards and will be built into a static website using a core set of technological standards. Our established process of generating a camera-ready PDF from the database also guards against the physical fragility of the on-line and the print resource, since extra copies, as well as future updated editions, can be printed on demand.

Thus, we foresee the database as a support and not a substitute for the print dictionary. While each format has advantages and disadvantages, the technology of the printed book still has great potential to produce dictionaries that will last for hundreds of years to serve the goals of the communities using them.